THE PRICE

By FRANCIS LYNDE — Illustrations by C. D. RHODES

SYNOPSIS.

—2—

Kenneth Griswold, an unsuccessful writer because of socialistic tendencies, sups with his friend Bainbridge at Chaudiere's restaurant in New Orleans and declares that if necessary he will steal to keep from starving. He holds up Andrew Galbraith, president of the Bayou State Security, in his private office and escapes with $100,000 in cash. By original methods he escapes the hue and cry.

CHAPTER III—Continued.

"The dragon may have teeth and claws, but it can neither see nor smell," he said, contemptuously, turning his steps riverward again. "Now I have only to choose my route and go in peace. How and where are the only remaining questions to be answered."

For an hour or more after his return to the riverfront, Griswold idled up and down the levee; and the end of the interval found him still undecided as to the manner and direction of his flight—to say nothing of the choice of a destination, which was even more evasive than the other and more immediately pressing decision.

His first thought had been to go back to New York. But there the risk of detection would be greater than elsewhere, and he decided that there was no good reason why he should incur it. Besides, he argued, there were other fields in which the sociological studies could be pursued under conditions more favorable than those to be found in a great city. In his mind's eye he saw himself domiciled in some thriving interior town, working and studying among people who were not unindividualized by an artificial environment. In such a community theory and practice might go hand in hand; he could know and be known; and the money at his command would be vastly more of a molding and controlling influence than it could possibly be in the smallest of circles in New York. The picture, struck out upon the instant, pleased him, and having sufficiently idealized it, he adopted it enthusiastically as an inspiration, leaving the mere geographical detail to arrange itself as chance, or subsequent events, might determine.

That part of the problem disposed of, there yet remained the choice of a line of flight; and it was a small thing that finally decided the manner of his going. For the third time in the hour of aimless wanderings he found himself loitering opposite the berth of the Belle Julie, an up-river steamboat whose bell gave sonorous warning of the approaching moment of departure. Toiling roustabouts, trailing in and out like an endless procession of human ants, were hurrying the last of the cargo aboard.

"Poor devils! They've been told that they are free men, and perhaps they believe it. But surely no slave of the Toulon galleys was ever in bitterer bondage. . . . Free?—yes, free to toil and sweat, to bear burdens and to be driven like cattle under the yoke! Oh, good Lord!—look at that!"

The ant procession had attacked the final tier of boxes in the lading, and one of the burden-bearers, a white man, had stumbled and fallen like a crushed pack animal under a load too heavy for him. Griswold was beside him in a moment. The man could not rise, and Griswold dragged him not untenderly out of the way of the others.

"Where are you hurt?"

The crushed one sat up and spat blood.

"I don't know: Inside, somewheres. I been dyin' on my feet any time for a year or two back."

"Consumption?" queried Griswold, briefly.

"I reckon so."

"Then you have no earthly business in a deck crew. Don't you know that?"

The man's smile was a ghastly face-wrinkling.

"Reckon I hain't got any business anywheres—out'n a horspital or a hole in the ground. But I kind o' thought I'd like to be planted 'longside the woman and the childer, if I could make out some way to git there."

"Where?"

The consumptive named a small river town in Iowa.

In Griswold impulse was the dominant chord always struck by an appeal to his sympathies. His compassion went straight to the mark, as it was sure to do when his pockets were not empty.

"What is the fare by rail to your town?" he inquired.

"I don't know: I never asked. Somewheres between twenty and thirty dollars, I reckon; and that's more money than I've seen sence the woman died."

Griswold hastily counted out a hundred dollars from his pocket fund and thrust the money into the man's hand.

"Take that and change places with me," he commanded, slipping on the mask of gruffness again. "Pay your fare on the train, and I'll take your job on the boat. Don't be a fool!" he added, when the man put his face in his hands and began to choke. "It's a fair enough exchange, and I'll get as much out of it one way as you will the other. What is your name? I may have to borrow it."

"Gavitt—John Wesley Gavitt."

"All right; off with you," said the liberator, curtly; and with that he shouldered the sick man's load and fell into line in the ant procession.

Once on board the steamer, he followed his file leader aft and made it his first care to find a safe hiding place for the tramp's bundle in the knotted handkerchief. That done, he stepped into the line again, and became the sick man's substitute in fact.

It was toil of the shrewdest, and he drew breath of blessed relief when the last man staggered up the plank with his burden. The bell was clanging its final summons, and the slowly revolving paddle-wheels were taking the strain from the mooring lines. Being near the bow line Griswold was one of the two who spring ashore at the mate's bidding to cast off. He was backing the hawser out of the last of its half-hitches, when a carriage was driven rapidly down to the stage and two tardy passengers hurried aboard. The mate bawled from his station on the hurricane deck.

"Now, then! Take a turn on that spring line out there and get them trunks aboard! Lively!"

The larger of the two trunks fell to the late recruit; and when he had set it down at the door of the designated stateroom, he did half absently what John Gavitt might have done without blame: read the tacked-on card, which bore the owner's name and address, written in a firm hand: "Charlotte Farnham, Wahaska, Minnesota."

"Thank you," said a musical voice at his elbow. "May I trouble you to put it inside?"

Griswold wheeled as if the mild-toned request had been a blow, and was properly ashamed. But when he saw the speaker, consternation promptly slew all the other emotions. For the owner of the tagged trunk was the young woman to whom, an hour or so earlier, he had given place at the paying teller's wicket in the Bayou State Security.

She saw his confusion, charged it to the card-reading at which she had surprised him, and smiled. Then he met her gaze fairly and became sane again when he was assured that she did not recognize him: became sane, and whipped off his cap, and dragged the trunk into the stateroom. After which he went to his place on the lower deck with a great thankfulness throbbing in his heart and an inchoate resolve shaping itself in his brain.

Late that night, when the Belle Julie was well on her way up the great river, he flung himself down upon the sacked coffee on the engine room-guard to snatch a little rest between landings, and the resolve became sufficiently cosmic to formulate itself in words.

"I'll call it an oracle," he mused. "One place is as good as another, just so it is inconsequent enough. And I am sure I've never heard of Wahaska."

Now Griswold the social rebel was, before all things else, Griswold the imaginative literary craftsman; and no sooner was the question of his ultimate destination settled thus arbitrarily than he began to prefigure the place and its probable lacks and havings. This process brought him by easy stages to pleasant idealizings of Miss Charlotte Farnham, who was, thus far, the only tangible thing connected with the destination dream. A little farther

She Saw His Confusion, and Charged It to the Card Reading.

along her personality laid hold of him and the idealizings became purely literary.

"She is a magnificently strong type!" was his summing up of her, made while he was lying flat on his back and staring absently at the flitting shadows among the deck beams overhead. "Her face is as readable as only the face of a woman instinctively good and pure in heart can be. Any man who can put her between the covers of a book may put anything else he pleases in it and snap his fingers at the world. If I am going to live in the same town with her, I ought to jot her down on paper before I lose the keen edge of the first impression."

He considered it for a moment, and then got up and went in search of a pencil and a scrap of paper. The dozing night clerk gave him both, with a sleepy malediction thrown in; and he went back to the engine room and scribbled his word picture by the light of the swinging incandescent.

He read it over thoroughly when it was finished, changing a word here and a phrase there with a craftsman's fidelity to the exactnesses. Then he shook his head regretfully and tore the scrap of paper into tiny squares, scattering them upon the brown flood surging past the engine room gangway.

"It won't do," he confessed reluctantly, as one who sacrifices good literary material to a stern sense of the fitness of things. "It is nothing less than a cold-blooded sacrilege. I can't make copy of her if I write no more while the world stands."

CHAPTER IV.

The Deck Hand.

Charlotte Farnham's friends—their number was the number of those who had seen her grow from childhood to maiden—and womanhood—commonly identified her for inquiring strangers as "good old Doctor Bertie's 'only,'" adding, men and women alike, that she was as well-balanced and sensible as she was good to look upon.

She had been spending the winter at Pass Christian with her aunt, who was an invalid; and it was for the invalid's sake that she had decided to make the return journey by river.

So it had come about that their staterooms had been taken on the Belle Julie; and on the morning of the second day out from New Orleans, Miss Gilman was so far from being travel sick that she was able to sit with Charlotte in the shade of the hurricane deck aft, and to enjoy, with what quavering enthusiasm there was in her, the matchless scenery of the lower Mississippi.

At Baton Rouge the New Orleans papers came aboard, and Miss Farnham bought a copy of the Louisianian. As a matter of course, the first page leader was a circumstantial account of the daring robbery of the Bayou State Security, garnished with startling headlines. Charlotte read it, half-absently at first, and a second time with interest awakened and a quickening of the pulse when she realized that she had actually been a witness of the final act in the near-tragedy. Her little gasp of belated horror brought a query from the invalid.

"What is it, Charlie, dear?"

For answer, Charlotte read the newspaper story of the robbery, headlines and all.

"For pity's sake! in broad daylight! How shockingly bold!" commented Miss Gilman.

"Yes; but that wasn't what made me gasp. The paper says: 'A young lady was at the teller's window when the robber came up with Mr. Galbraith—' Aunt Fanny, I was the 'young lady'!"

"You? horrors!" ejaculated the invalid, holding up wasted hands of deprecation.

Charlotte the well-balanced, smiled at the purely personal limitations of her aunt's point of view.

"It is very dreadful, of course; but it is no worse just because I happened to be there. Yet it seems ridiculously incredible. I can hardly believe it, even now."

"Incredible? How?"

"Why, there wasn't anything about it to suggest a robbery. Now that I know, I remember that the old gentleman did seem anxious or worried, or at least, not quite comfortable some way; but the young man was smiling pleasantly, and he looked like anything rather than a desperate criminal."

Miss Gilman's New England conservatism, unweakened by her long residence in the West, took the alarm at once.

"But no one in the bank knew you. They couldn't trace you by your father's draft and letter of identification, could they?"

Charlotte was mystified. "I should suppose they could, if they wanted to. But why? What if they could?"

"My dear child; don't you see? They are sure to catch the robber, sooner or later, and if they know how to find you, you might be dragged into court as a witness!"

Miss Farnham was not less averse to publicity than the conventionalities demanded, but she had, or believed she had, very clear and well-defined ideas of her own touching her duty in any matter involving a plain question of right and wrong.

"I shouldn't wait to be dragged," she asserted quietly. "It would be a simple duty to go willingly. The first thing I thought of was that I ought to write at once to Mr. Galbraith, giving him my address."

Thereupon issued discussion. At the end of the argument the conservative one had extorted a conditional promise from her niece. The matter should remain in abeyance until the question of conscientious obligation had been submitted to Charlotte's father and decided by him.

An hour later, when Miss Gilman was deep in the last installment of the current serial, Charlotte let her book slip from her fingers and gave herself to the passive enjoyment of the slowly-passing panorama which is the chief charm of inland voyaging.

From where she was sitting she could see the steamer's yawl swinging from its tackle at the stern-staff; and after many minutes it was slowly borne in upon her that the ropes were working loose. A man came aft to make the loosened tackle fast.

Something half familiar in his manner attracted Charlotte's attention, and her eyes followed him as he went on and hoisted the yawl into place. When he came back she had a fair sight of his face and her eyes met his. In the single swift glance half-formed suspicion became undoubted certainty; she looked again and her heart gave a great bound and then seemed suddenly to forget its office. It was useless to try to escape from the dismay-

The Niche Between the Coffee Sacks Was Empty.

ing fact. The stubble-bearded deckhand with the manner of a gentleman was most unmistakably a later reincarnation of the pleasantly smiling young man who had courteously made way for her at the teller's wicket in the Bayou State Security; who had smiled and given place to her while he was holding his pistol aimed at President Galbraith.

It was said of Charlotte Farnham that she was sensible beyond her years, and withal strong and straightforward in honesty of purpose. None the less, she was a woman. And when she saw what was before her, conscience turned traitor and fled away to give place to an uprush of hesitant doubts born of the sharp trial of the moment.

She got upon her feet, steadying herself by the back of her shair. She felt that she could not trust herself if she once admitted the thin edge of the wedge of delay. The simple and straightforward thing to do was to go immediately to the captain and tell him of her discovery, but she shrank from the thought of what must follow. They would seize him: he had proved that he was a desperate man, and there would be a struggle. And when the struggle was over they would bring him to her and she would have to stand forth as his accuser.

It was too shocking, and she caught at the suggestion of an alternative with a gasp of relief. She might write to President Galbraith, giving such a description of the deck-hand as would enable the officers to identify him without her personal help. It was like dealing the man a treacherous blow in the back, but she thought it would be kinder.

"Aunt Fanny," she began, with her face averted, "I promised you I wouldn't write to Mr. Galbraith until after we reached home—until I had told papa. I have been thinking about it since, and I—I think it must be done at once."

* * * * * * *

Griswold had come upon Miss Farnham unexpectedly, and when he passed her on his way forward he had seen the swift change in her face betokening some sudden emotion, and the recollection of it troubled him.

What if this clear-eyed young person had recognized him? He knew that the New Orleans papers had come aboard; he had seen the folded copy of the Louisianian in the invalid's lap. Consequently, Miss Farnham knew of the robbery, and the incidents were fresh in her mind. What would she do if she had penetrated his disguise?

He had a shock of genuine terror at this point and his skin prickled as at the touch of something loathsome. Up to that moment he had suffered none of the pains of the hunted fugitive; but he knew now that he had fairly entered the gates of the outlaw's inferno; that however cunningly he might cast about to throw his pursuers off the track, he would never again know what it was to be wholly free from the terror of the arrow that flieth by day.

The force of the Scriptural simile came to him with startling emphasis, bringing on a return of the prickling dismay. The stopping of the paddle-wheels and the rattling clangor of the gang-plank winch aroused him to action and he shook off the creeping numbness and ran aft to rummage under the cargo on the engine-room guards for his precious bundle. When his hand reached the place where it should have been, the blood surged to his brain and set up a clamorous dinning in his ears like the roaring of a cataract. The niche between the coffee sacks was empty.

CHAPTER V.

The Chain Gang.

While Griswold was grappling afresh with the problem of escape, and planning to desert the Belle Julie at the next landing, Charlotte Farnham was sitting behind the locked door of her stateroom with a writing pad on her knee over which for many minutes the suspended pen merely hovered. She had fancied that her resolve, once fairly taken, would not stumble over a simple matter of detail. But when she had tried a dozen times to begin the letter to Mr. Galbraith, the simplicities vanished and complexity stood in their room.

Try as she might to put the sham deck-hand into his proper place as an impersonal unit of a class with which society is at war, he perversely refused to surrender his individuality. At the end of every fresh effort she was confronted by the inexorable summing-up: in a world of phantoms there were only two real persons; a man who had sinned, and a woman who was about to make him pay the penalty.

It was all very well to reason about it, and to say that he ought to be made to pay the penalty; but that did not make it any less shocking that she, Charlotte Farnham, should be the one to set the retributive machinery in motion. Yet she knew she had the thing to do, and so, after many ineffectual attempts, the letter was written and sealed and addressed, and she went out to mail it at the clerk's office.

As it chanced, the engines of the steamer were slowing for a landing when she latched her stateroom door. The doors giving upon the forward saloon deck were open, and she heard the harsh voice of the mate exploding in sharp commands as the steamer lost way and edged slowly up to the river bank. A moment later she was outside, leaning on the rail and looking down upon the crew grouped about the inboard end of the uptilted landing stage. He was there; the man for whose destiny accident and the conventional sense of duty had made her responsible; and as she looked she had a fleeting glimpse of his face.

It was curiously haggard and woebegone; so sorrowfully changed that for an instant she almost doubted his identity. The sudden transformation added fresh questionings, and she began to ask herself thoughtfully what had brought it about. Then the man turned slowly and looked up at her as if the finger of her thought had touched him. There was no sign of recognition in his eyes; and she constrained herself to gaze down upon him coldly. But when Belle Julie's bow touched the bank, and the waiting crew melted suddenly into a tenuous line of burden-bearers, she fled through the deserted saloon to her stateroom and hid the fatal letter under the pillows in her berth.

That evening, after dinner, she went forward with some of the other passengers to the railed promenade which was the common evening rendezvous. The Belle Julie had tied up at a small town on the western bank of the great river, and the ant procession of roustabouts was in motion, going laden up the swing stage and returning empty by the foot plank. Left to herself for a moment, Charlotte faced the rail and again sought to single out the man whose fate she must decide.

She distinguished him presently; a grimy, perspiring unit in the crew, tramping back and forth mechanically, staggering under the heaviest loads, and staring stonily at the back of his file leader in endless round; a picture of misery and despair, Charlotte thought, and she was turning away with the dangerous rebellion against the conventions swelling again in her heart when Captain Mayfield joined her.

"I just wanted to show you," he said; and he pointed out a gang of men repairing a slip in the levee embankment below the town landing. It was a squad of prisoners in chains. The figures of the convicts were struck out sharply against the dark background of undergrowth, and the reflection of the sunset glow on the river lighted up their sullen faces and burnished the use-worn links in their leg-fetters.

"The chain-gang," said the captain, briefly. "That's about where the fellow that robbed the Bayou State Security will bring up, if they catch him. He'll have to be mighty tough and well-seasoned if he lives to worry through twenty years of that, don't you think?"

But Miss Farnham could not answer; and even the unobservant captain of river boats saw that she was moved and was sorry he had spoken.

In any path of performance there is but one step which is irrevocable, namely, the final one, and in Charlotte Farnham's besetment this step was the mailing of the letter to Mr. Galbraith. Many times during the evening she wrought herself up to the plunging point, only to recoil on the very brink; and when at length she gave up the the struggle and went to bed, the sealed letter was still under her pillow.

Now it is a well-accepted truism that an exasperated sense of duty, like remorse and grief, fights best in the night watches. It was of no avail to protest that her intention was still unshaken. Conscience urged that delay was little less culpable than refusal, since every hour gave the criminal an added chance of escape. The minutes dragged leaden-winged, and to sit quietly in the silence and solitude of the great saloon became a nerve-racking impossibility. When it went past endurance, she rose and stepped out upon the promenade deck.

The Belle Julie was approaching a landing. The electric searchlight eye on the hurricane deck was just over her head, and its great white cone seemed to hiss as it poured its dazzling flood of fictitious noonday upon the shelving river bank and the sleeping hamlet beyond. Out of the dusky underglow came the freight carriers, giving birth to a file of grotesque shadow monsters as they swung up the plank into the field of the searchlight.

The foot plank had been drawn in, the steam winch was clattering, and the landing stage had begun to come aboard, when the two men whose duty it was to cast off ran out on the tilting stage and dropped from its shore end. One of them fell clumsily, tried to rise, and sank back into the shadow; but the other scrambled up the steep bank and loosened the half-hitches in the wet hawser. With the slackening of the line the steamer began to move out into the stream, and the man at the mooring post looked around to see what had become of his companion.

"Get a move on youse!" bellowed the mate; but instead of obeying, the man ran back and went on his knees beside the huddled figure in the shadow.

At this point the watcher on the promenade deck began vaguely to understand that the first man was disabled in some way, and that the other was trying to lift him. While she looked, the engine-room bells jangled and the wheels began to turn. The mate forgot her and swore out of a full heart.

She put her fingers in her ears to shut out the clamor of abusive profanity; but the man on the bank paid no attention to the richly emphasized command to come aboard. Instead, he ran swiftly to the mooring post, took a double turn of the trailing hawser around it and stood by until the straining line snubbed the steamer's bow to the shore. Then, deftly casting off again, he darted back to the disabled man, hoisted him bodily to the high guard, and clambered aboard himself; all this while McGrath was brushing the impeding crew aside to get at him.

Charlotte saw every move of the quick-witted salvage in the doing, and wanted to cry out in sheer enthusiasm when it was done. Then, in the light from the furnace doors, she saw the face of the chief actor; it was the face of the man with the stubble beard.

She could not hear what McGrath was saying, but she could read hot wrath in his gestures, and in the way the men fell back out of his reach. All but one: the stubble-bearded white man was facing him fearlessly, and he appeared to be trying to explain.

Griswold was trying to explain, but the bullying first officer would not let him. It was a small matter; with the money gone, and the probability that capture and arrest were deferred only from landing to landing, a little abuse, more or less, counted as nothing. But he was grimly determined to keep McGrath from laying violent hands upon the negro who had twisted his ankle in jumping from the uptilted landing-stage.

"No; this is one time when you don't skin anybody alive!" he retorted, when a break in the stream of abuse gave him a chance. "You let the man alone. He couldn't help it. Do you suppose he sprained an ankle purposely to give you a chance to curse him out?"

The mate's reply was a brutal kick at the crippled negro. Griswold came closer.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Cynical Recipe for Success.

Oliver Onions, author of "Mushroom Town," etc., recently remarked: "A cynical friend told me the other day that the secret of success was to get a name for incorruptibility and then go ahead and corrupt it for much gold. I'm sure there's a weak spot in this somewhere, but judging from a good many, both of writers and politicians, perhaps there's something in it. Only unfortunately I can't apply the recipe to my own work, because I have too much fun writing to think about corruption one way or the other."

"Cozy" Is Hardly the Word to Use.

"Of course," said Mrs. M. T. Cackler, "it is real nice in the newspapers to describe the new Muehlebach hotel as cozy and homelike, but I should call a building with a tea furore and a cafe centurion, with marble floors and pillows of lapsus linguae and malefaction, and with gleaming chanticleers impending from the doomed ceilings, a great deal more rotund than cozy."—Kansas City Star.